

A Future with Hope

November 19, 2023 at First Church in Cambridge, Congregational, UCC

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Texts: Matthew 25: 14-30

Last Sunday afternoon, about 60 leaders, a dozen from First Church and the rest from neighboring Harvard Square congregations, gathered in Margaret Jewett Hall for a workshop led by scholar, activist, and national reparations movement leader Dr. Dave Ragland. The title of the event was “The Spiritual Practice of Reparations.” As I shared in my welcome to the group, it felt like a culmination of years of shared learning about and reckoning with our local histories and privilege, and also a new beginning — a chance to start creating a reparative culture across our congregations and city, of generating the relational glue necessary to sustain local efforts through whatever headwinds of cynicism, philosophical or strategic disagreement or roadblocks to action. We began in ritual, honoring ancestors and creating an altar. We broke bread together, heard song and testimony, and engaged with some of Dr. Ragland’s teaching. The most poignant piece of the afternoon came when he invited us into an envisioning exercise at our tables. He said, in essence, “Close your eyes. Imagine yourself ten years in the future. A headline before you reads, “Reparations for Black Americans Achieved - US Pays Out 14 Trillion Dollars.” He let this land with us for a moment. Bold right? And beautiful, if not tender, and maybe even painful to consider. And yet, before we could let our cynical minds kick into their well-practiced gears, he then invited us to think back, from that place 10 years from now and imagine how we ourselves were part of making it happen! What story would we tell ourselves about what were we doing now that led to that reality? The exercise underscored the power of imagination to inspire hope, courage, creativity, purpose, and even brass-tacks practical and strategic thinking!

In case you haven’t heard, it’s Stewardship Season at First Church. I thought: what better start to a Pledge Sunday sermon than imagining an example where we “collectively” relinquish vast amounts of our resources for the greater good? Consider it a warm-up because we both know the ask for our 2024 pledges is coming soon. I’ll return to this, but let’s first look back at our scripture.

Having just heard it, you might think “The Parable of the Talents” is an odd choice for today. Maybe if we were a church of the so-called prosperity gospel, one that readily bowed to America’s golden calves of consumerism or capitalism, it could work. “For to all those who have, more will be given!” But it doesn’t sound very Jesus-y, right? Instead, it reads like some generic, online business school class on how to land a ‘cush’ job at a hedge fund or a private equity firm! What a parable for our times, though, right? About how the rich just keep getting richer, and the risk-averse guy who chooses not to work the street or the markets, who plays it safe and moral, withholds his talent, gets smacked down by the boss, and is left with nothing but weeping, his teeth grinding in bitter anger!

Usually, the master in these parables points to God. So, what gives? Some preachers have tried to invert this one, if you will, calling it a description of the world as it is, an allegory for the Roman Regime, wherein the harsh master is really the earthly emperor. In this light, the first two servants are an example of what not to do. One should sympathize with the last who warily withheld his talent from the empire’s evil ways. I can see this, but for today at least, I’m not buying it! I think the master here, however harsh his character appears, *is* meant to represent God, as usual. And the moral? Go forth! Take

risks! Invest whatever God has given you, and...this is key... you, too, will be invited to “enter into the Joy of the Master!” Did you catch that bit?

More profoundly, I think it’s a parable about imagination, daring risk with and for God, and ultimately about living one’s life with a single-minded commitment to manifesting a bold future not only with hope but with genuine joy. And the point is that it all concerns our decisions right here and now.

You see... a lot of Jesus parables point to the kin-dom, that realm of God’s promises that are already but not yet here! They cast stories and characters that invite us to imagine the *world as it should be* but through *world as it is* terms! Did you see how this one started: “For it is as if”...there’s the imagination! But then he talks about things like work and money in terms everyone can understand. Check this out: a talent back in the day, was the equivalent of about 15 or 20 years of a person’s wage. Take an average income in this country of about \$60k, and it means that 5 talents. 5 talents (5 x 17.5 x 60) = over 5 million bucks! These aren’t mere pennies or dimes we are talking about here. These are serious investments - whether of money or more symbolically (after all, it is a parable), of time or other resources. What’s more, the master is inviting us to be part of an opportunity to generate extreme abundance! As one scholar has noted, Jesus often uses the “and how much more” expression in his teachings as a kind of comparative hyperbole, a rhetorical device to make a point, and we see that at work here, too. He starts with a scoundrel as a master, maybe because that’s what most of his audience knows, and he starts with big money! He says come, invest with me! Invest in my family’s business! I wonder if the reason Jesus chooses to depict the master so harshly is because he wants us to know that he knows we live amidst harsh realities. Severe systemic oppression and violence, oligarch-style bosses ruling the world, horrendous wars, and apocalyptic threats of mass extinction. “A future with hope?!” Now, Jesus? Really?” But I see Jesus meeting us with this one and saying - I hear ya! Tell me about it! I know. And, if this *scoundrel* can do it, how much more will the God of mercy and love bring you - how much more true will the joy be, how much greater the freedom, how much deeper the love and justice and peace and connection of this kin-dom! Try to withhold or hide what you’ve been given, and you’ll be left isolated, afraid, alone in what the scripture calls “outer darkness”! Ouch! No way! It sounds worth the risk to avoid that. As my colleague and commentator Matt Boulton has said: “These aren’t risks of ‘the reckless, thrill-seeking sort, but rather the wise, generative sort, the kind of boldness that perceptively surveys any given situation, and then — with vigor, hope, and imagination — invests resources in ways that amplify and multiply the goodness of the world. The kingdom of heaven is coming, indeed, is dawning even now, and it’s breaking into the world in and through our daring, our chutzpah, our audacious trust that one good thing can become two.”¹

Can we begin to imagine our resources in this way, as a means towards partnering with God, achieving that future with hope and joy and drawing it near? It begins with taking an inventory of what God has already given us! Start there with your own gifts (time, money, resources in whatever form). Imagine investing whatever that is - going all in, as much as you can - not just with the leftovers or some random “this feels about right” amount, but with cream off the top - like a good ol’ biblical tithe of 10%! Who’s with me in that? Imagine giving and risking something until it hurts and squeezes and pinches now, and trust that it’s precisely this letting go will allow you to step all the more away from fear into love! Share

¹ <https://www.saltproject.org/progressive-christian-blog/2020/11/9/be-daring-salts-lectionary-commentary-for-twenty-fourth-week-after-pentecost>

your gifts, especially in these times, and claim your share all the more of God's eternal joy and purpose, partnership, cause that's not going anywhere!

Allow me to switch gears for a moment. I wonder how many here have read the black feminist, Afro-futurist, MacArthur Award-winning genius, novelist Octavia Butler. She died in 2006 but her often dystopian novels explore themes of Black injustice, women's rights, climate change and political oppression. One of her novel series is titled after Jesus' parables and the second is called the "Parable of the Talents." The book, though published in 1998, is set in the year 2032. A fascist US President named Andrew Jarrett has just been elected. In the book, she writes: "Jarrett supporters have been known, now and then, to form mobs and burn people at the stake for being witches. Witches! In 2032! ...Jarrett's people have [even] been known to beat or drive out Unitarians, for goodness' sake. Jarrett condemns the burnings but does so in such mild language that his people are free to hear what they want to hear. As for the beatings, the tarring and feathering, and the destruction of "heathen houses of devil-worship," he has a simple answer: "Join us! Our doors are open to every nationality, every race! Leave your sinful past behind, and become one of us. Help us to make America great again." That was Jarrett's campaign slogan in the book of fiction that Octavia Butler wrote, again, in 1998!

Prescient! Prophetic! Powerful! Butler's work imagines a world with a new religion called Earthseed, based in Christian roots, but recast and centered less around doctrine and belief and more around action and love. Butler captures it this way: "God is Change, And in the end, God prevails. But meanwhile... Kindness eases Change. Love quiets fear. And a sweet and powerful Positive obsession Blunts pain, Diverts rage, And engages each of us In the greatest, The most intense Of our chosen struggles." Earthseed is a countercultural force of resilience, survival, healing and love in an otherwise dreary, almost apocalyptic landscape of her novels.

Again, from her Parable: "Earthseed is about preparing to fulfil the Destiny. It's about learning to live in partnership with one another in small communities, and at the same time, working out a sustainable partnership with our environment." And later she defines these partnerships: "Partnership is giving, taking, learning, teaching, offering the greatest possible benefit while doing the least possible harm. Partnership is mutualistic symbiosis. Partnership is life. Any entity, any process that cannot or should not be resisted or avoided must somehow be partnered. Partner one another. Partner diverse communities. Partner life. Partner any world that is your home. Partner God. Only in partnership can we thrive, grow, Change. Only in partnership can we live."

Her writing and truth-telling are at once bleak in their dystopian realism. Yet, they also sow seeds and invest talents, offering a powerful map for how we will make it through the coming decades without losing our center, our dignity, or our joy.

With Jesus' parable, she too asks: how do we live our lives now, out of imagined future with hope, and into a realized future of justice and joy? And what, after all, is our own "sweet and powerful positive obsession" if not God - whose prevailing Love and Truth we seek to discern and embody here in this space of grace and community?

First Church, I invite you to close your eyes and imagine this community in 10 years! 2033! And try worrying now who will be president then! After 400 years as a continuing congregation in Cambridge, we are preparing to enter our 5th century! It's 2033! We have a vibrant and diverse staff, a student of

Peter's at the organ. We've worked out a way with a few other churches to share the best multiracial gospel choir in town! We have, as we've always done, discerned how to continue to live "on purpose" and in partnership. Our ministries continue to be examples of truth-telling, healing, compassion, resilience, and countercultural faith practices that allow us to persist, survive, and thrive in community and in changing ecosystems, come what may, in a world that is hotter and even more tension-filled than it is today! And yet, in the face of that, I imagine our leaders working with top-brass at Harvard, the City of Cambridge, and tribal elders from local indigenous communities and descendants of Cambridge enslaved on a powerful first-of-its-kind citywide healing ceremony to mark the occasion of turning to a new century in 2033, a new day! A City-Wide 5 Billion Dollar Reparations Fund is announced, thanks to growing public-private partnerships, along with several "Land Back" initiatives, including one made possible because congregations like ours learned how to pool our buildings and resources, right-size our own needs and spending on ourselves, so we can all the more give ourselves away to others! After almost 50 years in operation, our Shelter is finally winding down operations because of the success of their advocacy and Greater Boston Interfaith Organization's affordable housing efforts ten years before. All the while, First Church is a sanctuary of spiritual grounding, reliable care, feeding, and friendship in hard times and good! And all of this, thanks to the incredible generosity of people sitting in the pews, right here, right now! For what were you doing ten years from then that made it happen? As the story goes, on Nov 19, 2023, the church was able to achieve a balanced budget after decades of deficits, achieve financial sustainability, and even build in some buffer to begin dreaming beyond its current austerity to support a more diverse staff fully, the program for all ages, to properly care for this meetinghouse of gathering and grace!

You see where I'm going here. First Church needs partners, and so do you! So, do we all. We need us to be all in, as much as we can be, to take risks in our giving and trusting in one another and God that our investments will be amplified and multiplied beyond imagination! Our ever-changing world needs partnerships like First Church to continue to exist and persist and resist and imagine and make real the love and justice of God! So, what do you say? Did I inspire anybody to add a zero or two on one of the end annual pledge number? Or to increase the first number? Either way, the good news this week is that God calls us into this kind of daring and adventurous life together! What's more, 'God pairs this invitation with the promise of entering into divine joy.' So be bold in your pledge today! Be of good courage! Trust in God and this partnership to amplify and multiply the good that God is already and not yet doing in our midst! Look ahead to, think back from and step into a future with hope! Amen!

